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PRESCHOOL LANGUAGE PROJECT.

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SINCE THE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT IS IDENTIFIABLE IN THE PRIMARY GRADES, IT IS NECESSARY TO LAY THE GROUNDWORK FOR VOCATIONAL TRAINING MUCH EARLIER THAN HIGH SCHOOL. THIS IS THE RATIONALE FOR THE FIVE-YEAR PRESCHOOL LANGUAGE PROJECT FUNDED UNDER THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ACT. THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS PROJECT ARE TO PREPARE A SET OF LANGUAGE INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS FOR USE IN A DAY CARE PROGRAM AND TO TRAIN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH PEOPLE. IN DEVELOPING THE LANGUAGE MATERIALS THE BASIC PREMISE IS THAT IT IS IMPORTANT FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN TO DEVELOP STANDARD MIDDLE CLASS SPEECH. PROGRAMED MATERIALS ARE BEING PREPARED WHICH CAN BE PRESENTED BY TEACHER AIDES IN A FIFTEEN MINUTE SESSION EACH DAY. SPECIAL EVALUATIVE INSTRUMENTS HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED FOR THE PURPOSE OF ASSESSING THE VALUE OF THIS PROJECT. RESULTS OF THE PROGRAM WILL BE AVAILABLE IN ONE YEAR. THIS SPEECH WAS GIVEN AT A WORKING CONFERENCE ON RESEARCH AND ACTIVITY IN THE LANGUAGE ARTS FOR THE PRE-PRIMARY/PRIMARY CULTURALLY DIVERSE NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING CHILD IN ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO, JUNE 4-6, 1967. (ES)

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PRESCHOOL LANGUAGE PROJECT

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The preschool language project is a five-year program, and is funded by the U. S. Office of Education under the Vocational Education Act. This Act is sort of an innovation, a new concept in thinking. It reveals the fact that people now realize that vocational education doesn't begin where regular education ends, but really must go back much further. It is now sort of a truism to say that the dropout in the junior high or the early high school years is easily identified in the second or third grade. We have to start working for vocational training much earlier than the vocational high school. So if it seems peculiar for a preschool research project to be within the auspices of the Vocational Education Act, this is somewhat the rationale.

The objectives of our program are, first of all, to prepare a set of instructional materials for use in a day care program or, now, a Head Start program. We have had in L. A., for some time, a day care program which worked with what we called an intermediate group--not the hard core poverty group--but children from broken homes which were upwardly mobile, situations where the mother is working and is interested in a good foundation for the child. We discovered early that some of the methodology used with this disadvantaged group did not apply to the day care population.

Our secondary purpose is to train research people. Most of those who work with us are part-time employees, candidates for advanced degrees, who work with children and prepare materials.

For the language program, we look at the objectives in terms of the child's use of expressive language--the child's ability to produce standard English.

We are being constantly confronted with the task of how to evaluate the child who doesn't speak English, for all of the instruments that we have for evaluation are in terms of standards of not only middle class children, but children from English speaking backgrounds. We are trying to build a program to provide standard English and we are recognizing that, to get on in this culture, these children must become proficient in standard English. There are abrasive factors in a language which can prejudice a teacher. Even at a very, very early age with a child who doesn't speak the customary middle class speech, the teacher's attitudes, the whole aura of the classroom, becomes, for these deficient children, an experience of sight prejudice,

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which the children, in a self-fulfilling prophecy type of way, tend to maintain. They don't perform. The teacher becomes more and more punitive and perhaps doesn't have expectations for the children. And where there are no expectations, the children fulfill this lack of expectations by not performing.

So we have taken as our basic premise that it is important for children to develop standard middle class speech. Not that we want to have these children feel that their language is inferior; it is just different, and we are trying in our program to give children a basic understanding of the kind of language which is more appropriate to the school situation. We are trying to develop a school language for these children.

The other important area is how the child responds to the receptive use of language. In the child's earliest classroom experiences the teacher speaks to the child and has certain expectations of performance. If children are not attuned to this language, to this instructional-teacher language, they do not perform; not because they are recalcitrant, or because they are unwilling or unable to perform, but because they don't know what is expected of them. So our second emphasis is on teaching children the language of instruction, teaching them to perform, even in the kindergarten.

For school learning, however, most important of all is the child's ability to use his own language as a mediator in problem solving and in various logical operations which are fundamental to all kinds of academic learning.

The format of our program is, I think, not an unfamiliar one. It is to take only perhaps fifteen minutes of the school day, in the day care center, or some other kind of pre-kindergarten environment, and present programmed instructional materials. Our work is to prepare materials in such a form that a teacher aide, who is not necessarily a trained teacher, can then present this to the child and in essence be somewhat of a monitor who sees that the child is listening, and that the information is getting across in the fashion which it is intended.

The format also is to present this language experience within traditional subject matter areas, and as you are all aware, in the early years, in pre-kindergarten, most subject matter is in terms of verbal concepts. The labels score the concepts. We have a math program, for instance, but here we are teaching the language of math. We are teaching the language of quantity, quantitative modifiers. In logic, we are teaching the either-or concepts, the disjunctive argument, conjunction, disjunction, negation. It all comes down to knowing what you mean when you say "not," or "either," or "neither," and simple kinds of logical operations which are expressed in language terms.

During the first year, we did a number of assessment studies with two objectives in mind--first, to determine what the needs of the population were, what they could do, and whether certain things that we've been reading

in the literature about disadvantaged children applied in our situation.

The first thing we hit our heads against was that we didn't have any instruments to measure what the children could do appropriately. So we got involved in the development of evaluation instruments. We did studies with the Wepman for auditory discrimination, with the Frostig for perceptual discrimination. We tried to do some measurement of ability in languages, in the Peabody and the Goodenough-Harris Draw-A-Man, but we were not satisfied with the results. We did not feel that the tests showed that we were measuring in the Wepman the child's ability to discriminate the comparisons, and in the Frostig we found we were measuring the child's ability to draw rather than his ability to discriminate forms. So we spent a good deal of time in this past year getting data with some new instruments which we have developed which we feel are much more apt to measure the child's ability to discriminate rather than his ability to perform a task.

We also carried out a number of studies in the field, in some other areas where it was felt that these children were different in terms of reinforcement; that is, everybody hears that the disadvantaged populations respond to material things, to reinforcers which are tangible rewards, and we did not find this to be true. As a matter of fact, we found--these were comparative studies with middle class and disadvantaged children--that middle class children got bored, and they were apt to want to cut out of the task much more quickly than disadvantaged children regardless of what kind of reinforcer or punisher was used.

In some cases we did try to use a negative reinforcer. We didn't shock them or stick pins into them, but we did say, "Oh no, that is not right," when the person had picked the wrong picture. The point is that these young children, no matter what you did, were so interested in a task of picture selection that the disadvantaged children were apt to stay much longer with it than the advantaged child.

Another area of investigation was in terms of what kind of instructional procedures are most appropriate. We were planning to have a programmed instruction format--and of course this lends itself much more easily to written or verbal materials than three dimensional manipulanda. We wanted to see if it was really that much superior that a child be able to handle and work with objects. And in this particular experiment, we found that there were no significant differences. From an experimental point of view, that doesn't mean there aren't any, but with this population we didn't find any. We did find that they did learn whether it was in three or two-dimensional format and so we felt reassured in going ahead with the program we had planned.

There were a number of other studies that we carried out but mainly our work centered on the development of the evaluation instruments.

During the second year we spent our time in the preparation of programs and the administration of these programs.. We had to develop pre- and post-test measures which were related to the kinds of materials that we developed. If you are interested and we can have some other time to discuss the kinds of materials we have and the evaluation materials themselves, I'll be very happy to do that.

This next year, during the summer, we will look at the data we will be getting from our first pilot study. We will revise the first year program and, beginning in September, we will administer the revised program to a new group of four-to-five-year-olds and prepare a second year follow-up program for the first year group that would be a kindergarten program in the same type of format.

So then, we will have two years going, the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten year, and the following year we will have some revised materials for the kindergarten year and hope we'll be able to have some instruments with which we can measure differences.